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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the positive relationship that exists between Christian Right influence in state Republican parties and the introduction of phonics bills. Prior to 1990, phonics language appeared in the statutes of only three states: Arizona, New Mexico, and Ohio. Since 1990, 101 bills encouraging or requiring the use of phonics as a teaching methodology have been introduced in state legislatures. From 1990 through 1994, the mean number of phonics bills was 3.2 bills yearly. From 1995 through 1997, the mean number of phonics bills was 28.3 yearly. More recent bills are likely to have highly detailed language; 28 bills have been enacted. Although phonics advocates include individuals holding a wide spectrum of religious and/or political views, phonics bills are more likely to be introduced by Republican legislators or in states where the Christian Right has substantial or dominant influence in the state's Republican Party. States that experienced challenges to Harcourt's whole-language reading series "Impressions" are more likely to have had phonics bills. Included are 19 explanatory footnotes. (Author/MLH)

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The Christian Right and the Prophonics Movement©

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Abstract

Since 1990, 101 bills encouraging or requiring the use of phonics as a teaching methodology have been introduced in state legislatures. From 1990 through 1994, the mean number of phonics bills was 3.2 bills per year. From 1995 through the end of 1997, the mean number of phonics bills was 28.3. More recent bills are more likely to have highly detailed language. Twenty-eight bills have been enacted. While advocates of phonics include individuals holding a wide spectrum of religious and/or political views, phonics bills are more likely to be introduced by Republican legislators. In addition, a positive relationship exists between Christian Right influence in state Republican parties and the introduction of phonics bills. Finally, states that experienced challenges to Harcourt, Brace's *Impressions* reading series are more likely to have had phonics bills.

The debate over methods of reading instruction has been a frequent subject of commentary in the popular press.[1] In the 1990s, prophonics advocates, such as Cal Thomas and John Rosemond have begun to publish editorials and columns encouraging the use of systematic, intensive phonics.[2] Supporters and opponents of systematic, intensive phonics have been quick to join the fray by writing letters to their local newspapers. Popular education newspapers and journals have also published a number of articles related to the "great debate."[3] Finally, academicians have addressed not only the merits of reading methodology but also the educational implications of the issue.[4] What has been missing from all these "reports from the front, both

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[1] See James Collins, "How Johnny Should Read," *Time*, 27 October 1997, pp. 78-81; Nicholas Lemann, "The Reading Wars," *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1997, pp. 128-134; LynNell Hancock and Pat Wingert, "If You Can Read This You Learned to Read Using Phonics or so Its Supporters Say," *Newsweek*, 13 May 1996, p. 75.

[2] See Cal Thomas, "It's a Crime Education Is No Longer Hooked on Phonics," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 17 September 1993 , sec. A, p. 15; Cal Thomas, "Federal Control of Schools is One-Way Road to Illiteracy," *Philadelphia Daily News*, 4 April 1994, p. 22; Cal Thomas, "Back to the Future of Phonics," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 30 May 1996, sec. B, p. 7; John Rosemond, "Studies Hint the Days of Whole Language Are Over," *Norman (OK) Transcript*, 10 May 1996, p. 4.

[3] Diane S. Mancus, and Curtis K. Carlson, "Politics and Reading Instruction Make a Dangerous Mix," *Education Week*, 27 February 1985, p. 29; Karen Diegmueller, A War of Words: Whole Language under Siege, *Education Week*, 3 March 1996, pp. 1, 14, 15.

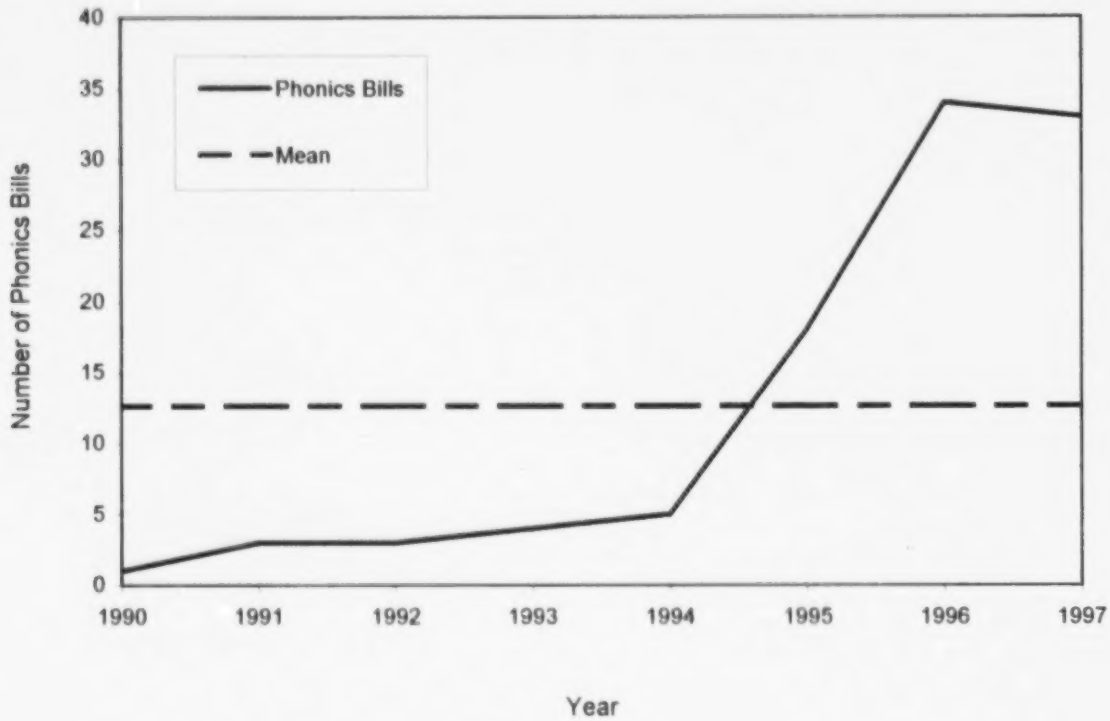
[4] Diane Sirna Mancus, and Curtis K. Carlson, "The Impact of the New Right on Reading Instruction in the United States," Sioux Falls College, 1984; Ellen H. Brinkley, "Intellectual Freedom and the Theological Dimensions of Whole Language," in *Preserving Intellectual Freedom: Fighting Censorship in Our Schools*, ed. Jean E. Brown (Urbana: Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994), pp. 111-121; Ellen H. Brinkley, "Faith in the Word: Examining Religious Right Attitudes about Texts," *English Journal* 84 (September 1995): 91-98; Constance Weaver,"The Theology and Politics of Reading: Conflicting Views." Paper presented at the workshop of the Program in Language and Literacy, Tucson, Az., December 1994 ; Constance Weaver and Ellen H. Brinkley, "Phonics, Whole Language and the Religious and Political Right," Western Michigan University, 1996.

partisan and objective," has been a comprehensive examination of how the educational and political debate over phonics has been translated into political action in the form of proposed legislation (phonics bills). This study examines the number of phonics bills introduced into state legislatures from 1990 through the end of 1997 and the substance and rhetoric of these bills. The enactment of phonics bills is also examined. The study concludes with an analysis of political and religio-political factors influencing the introduction of this type of legislation.

Proposed Phonics Legislation, 1990-1997

State bills encouraging or requiring the use of phonics rose dramatically in 1995. Figure 1 shows the number of phonics bills from 1990 through the end of 1997. Overall, during this period 101 bills were introduced into state legislatures. Interestingly, whereas from 1990 through the end of 1994, the mean number of such bills was 3.2 (n=16) in 1995, 18 such bills were introduced in 14 state legislatures. Thirty-four bills were introduced in 1996 and thirty-three in 1997 with the mean number of bills introduced from the beginning of 1995 through the end of 1997 being 28.3 (n=85). This indicates that 1995 was a turning point with respect to the number of bills encouraging or requiring the use of phonics. Figure 1 shows the number of phonics bills introduced into state legislatures from 1990 through the end of 1997.

Fig. 1 State Phonics Bills, 1990-1997



Phonics bills have been introduced into 26 state legislatures.[5] Through the end of 1994, bills had been introduced into eight state legislatures. In 1995, phonics bills were introduced in 12 states. Bills were introduced in 13 and 14 legislatures in 1996 and 1997, respectively. Figure 2 shows the number of states with phonics bills, by year.

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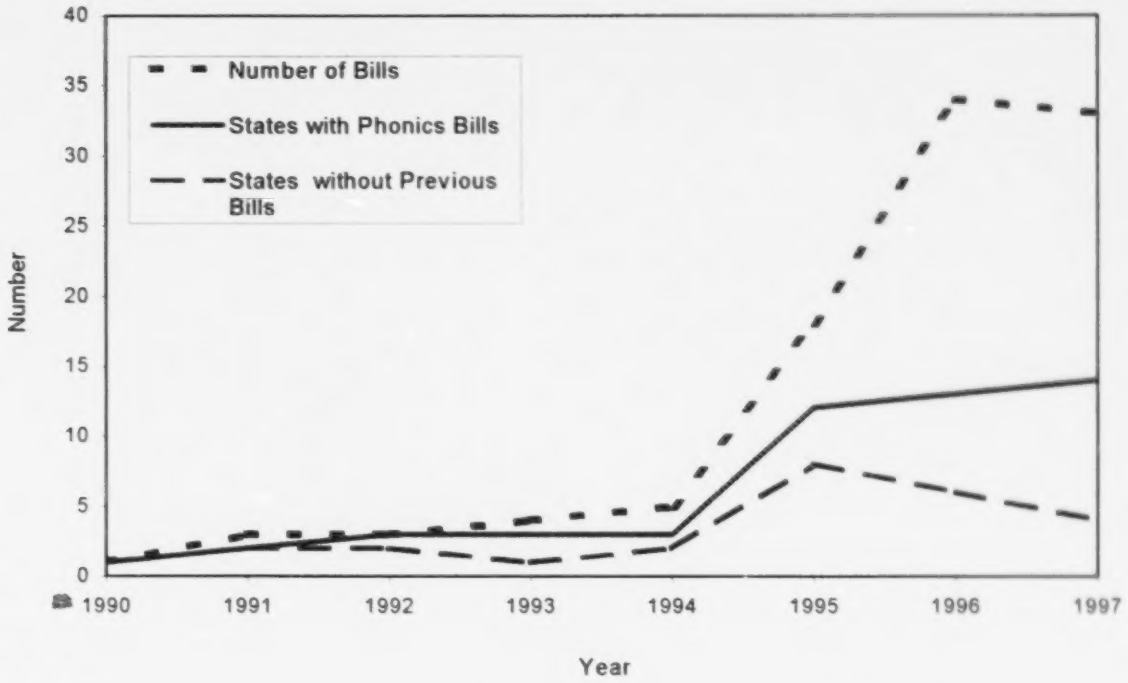
[5] Alabama (1994, 1995), Alaska (1997), California (1995, 1996, 1997), Delaware (1996, 1997), Hawaii (1992, 1996), Idaho (1996, 1997), Illinois (1996), Indiana (1996), Iowa (1991, 1993), Louisiana (1992, 1995, 1997), Maine (1990), Mississippi (1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997), Missouri (1994), New York (1995), North Carolina (1995, 1996), North Dakota (1997), Ohio (1995, 1996, 1997), Oklahoma (1995, 1996, 1997), Oregon (1997), Pennsylvania (1995), South Carolina (1991, 1993, 1995, 1997), Tennessee (1996), Texas (1995, 1997), Vermont (1997), Washington (1995, 1997), and Wisconsin (1996).

Fig. 2 States with Phonics Bills, 1990-1997



A number of states have had multiple phonics bills, either because such bills were introduced into more than one legislative session or multiple bills were introduced within a given year. Considering only states with multiple bills introduced in a given year, of the 8 states with phonics bills introduced from 1990 through 1994, 62.5 percent (n=5) had multiple bills. Four states had two bills; one state Mississippi had three bills (two in 1993, one in 1994). In 1995, one-third (n=6) percent of the states with phonics bills had multiple bills. Five states had two 1995 bills; Mississippi had three. In 1996, seven states (20.6 percent) had multiple bills; however the number of bills ranged from 2 (Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee) to 10 (California). In 1997, seven states (21.2 percent) had multiple bills. Again, California, with seven bills, had the largest number of bills introduced.

Substance of Proposed Phonics Legislation

Fifty bills (49.5 percent) relate to the use of phonics as an instructional methodology. Of the 68 bills introduced through the end of 1996, 31 (45.6 percent) contained this provision. In 1997, 57.6 percent of phonics bills related to the use of phonics as a method of teaching reading. What is striking is the occurrence of directive language, for example "shall be used," rather than permissive language encouraging language the use of phonics. In a few cases, bills specify that phonics shall be the only method used. Thirty bills (29.7 percent) pertain to inservice or staff development. Prior to the beginning of 1997, 33.8 percent (n=23) related to inservice. For 1997 bills, seven (21.2 percent) had this provision. Overall, twenty-six bills (25.7 percent) had provisions dealing with preservice training/certification. Miscellaneous provisions include

1. Requirements for parental notification (typically that schools must communicate the method of reading instruction and/or test results).
2. Testing with some bills requiring retention when students score below a certain level.
3. The use of phonics in adult or bilingual education or both.
4. An "opt-out" provision.
5. The use of phonics with incarcerated juveniles.
6. Authorization and/or funding for demonstration projects.
7. Housing the reading curriculum in the school library.

8. The specification of specific curriculum/textbooks.[6]

9. Funding for phonics-related materials.

Although the great majority require or encourage phonics, a few state bills have punitive provisions. Two Tennessee bills would have stripped colleges and universities that failed to provide a course in phonics of their right to grant teachers' certificates, while two Washington state bills would have established legal remedies for parents living in districts that failed to use phonics in teaching reading, i.e. parents were granted a statutory right to sue noncomplying districts.[7]

The Language of Phonics Bills

Early bills were relatively mild using the term "phonics" without descriptors. A cursory examination of more recent bills indicated that while such statements as "phonics shall be taught in all first grade classes" continued to be employed in some bills many used a number of adjectives and descriptive phrases to communicate precisely what the legislator(s) intended.[8] Such words and phrases as "systematic," "early," "direct," "intensive, "blending," word-attack skills," "sound to symbol relationships," "phonemic awareness," and so forth, are common. Even more recently

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[6] "Open Court," "Professor Phonics Gives Sound Advice," "The Spalding Road to Reading," "Distar," "Sing, Spell, Read and Write," or "Word Wise" (H.B. 971, 1996 Leg., Reg. Sess. (Miss.)

[7] S.B. 2878, 99th Leg., 2d Reg. Sess. (Tenn.); H.B. 2908, 99th Leg., 2d Reg. Sess. (Tenn.); S.B. 5498, 54th Leg., 1995 Reg. Sess.(Wash.).

[8] H.B. 835, 163d Leg., 1996 Sess. (Miss.).

yet, the term "decoding" or its variants, such as "decodable text," have begun to appear. In one case, a bill specifies that text must be at least 95 percent decodable.[9]

Overall, the mean number of descriptors per phonics bill was 6.6.[10] From 1990 through 1993, the mean number of descriptors per phonics bill was 0.67. In 1994, the mean number of descriptors per bill was 7.6 resulting in a mean of 3.1 descriptors between 1990 and 1994, inclusive. In 1995, 1996, and 1997 the mean number of descriptors was 6.4, 6.7, and 8.4 respectively. Figure 3 displays the number of phonics bills and states with such bills superimposed on the mean number of descriptors, by year.

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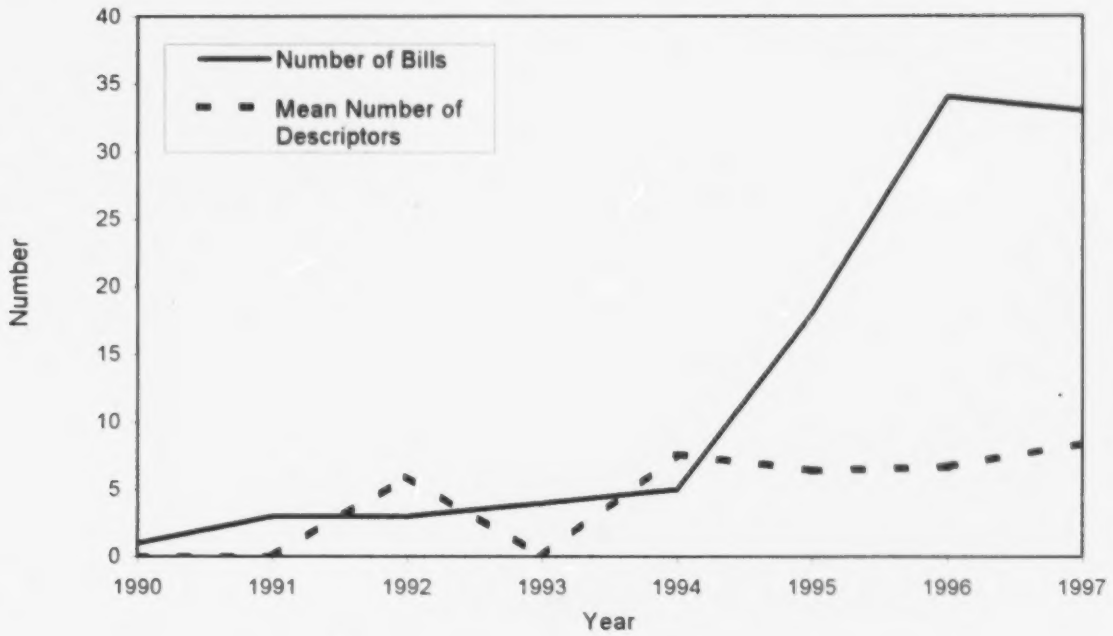
[9] H.B. 1362, 164th Leg., 1997 Sess. (Miss.); S.B. 3004, 164th Leg., 1997 Sess. (Miss.).

[10] Full texts of all bills except S.C.R. 202 18th Leg. (Hawaii) and S,R. 166 18th Leg. (Hawaii) were examined to produce the data discussed in this section.

Fig. 3 Descriptors in State Phonics Bills, 1990-1997

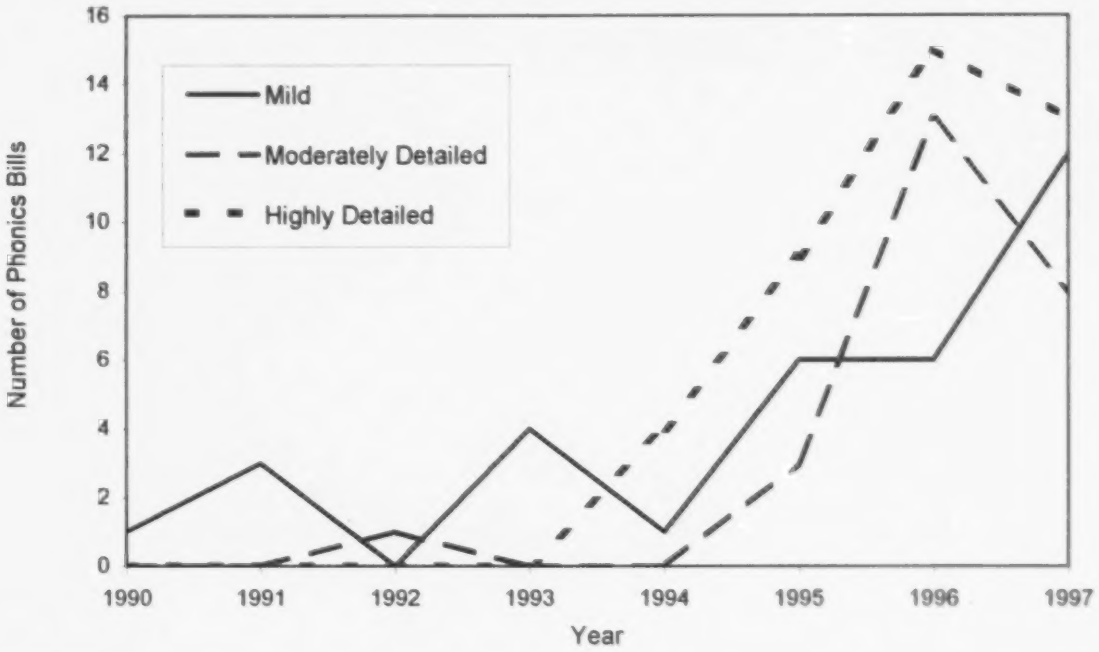


Note: The data for 1992 is somewhat deceptive in that a full-text version for only one of the three bills introduced that year could be obtained.

In addition to analyzing the bills according their mean number of descriptors, the number of bills in the categories of having mildly, moderately, and highly detailed language could also be identified. For the purposes of analysis, bills were divided into these three groups. Those with less than three descriptors were considered to have mildly detailed language. Those with three to six descriptors were considered to have moderately detailed language whereas those with seven or more descriptors were considered to have highly detailed language. Eight states had a mean

number of descriptors that fell into the highly detailed category.[11] Figure 4 shows the number of bills with mild, moderately detailed, and highly detailed language, by year.

Fig. 4 Language Detail in State Phonics Bills, 1990-1997



Of the 99 full-text bills available, one third (n=33) employed mildly detailed language, 25.3 (n=25) percent employed moderately detailed language, and 41.4 (n=41) employed highly detailed language. Of the 16 bills introduced from 1990 through the end of 1994, 9 had mild language, 1 had moderately detailed language, and 4 had highly detailed language.[12] Of the 18 bills introduced

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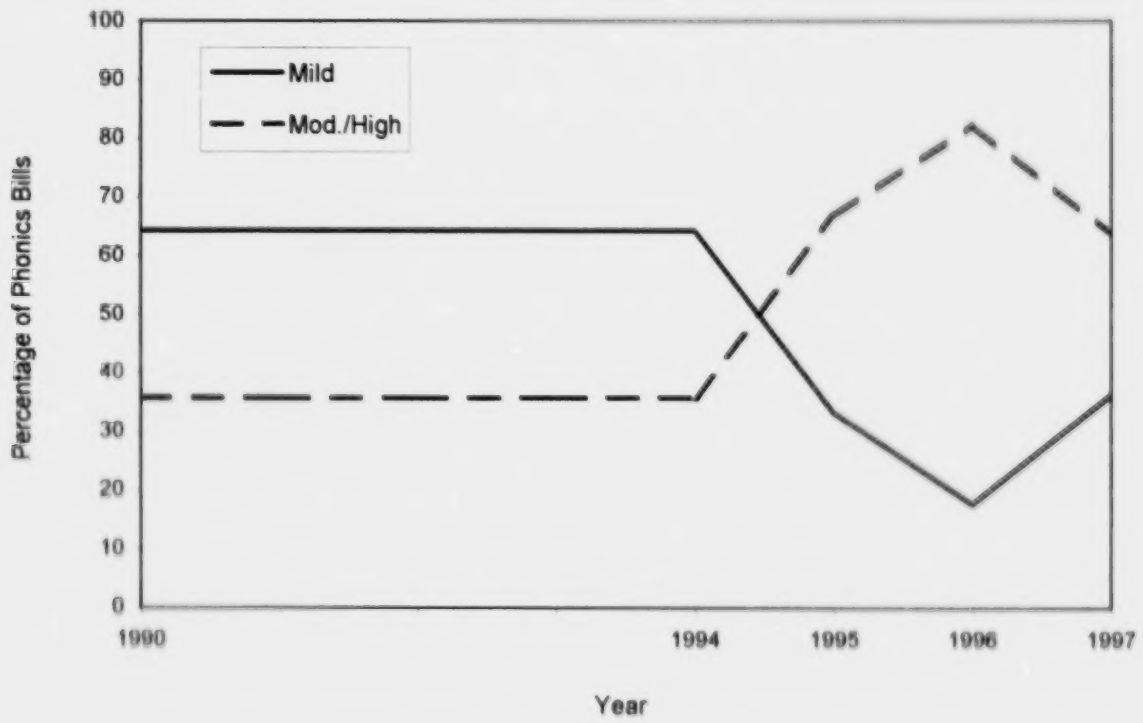
[11] Alabama (3 bills, mean number of descriptors 8), Alaska (one bill, ten descriptors), California (20 bills, mean number of descriptors 8.05), Mississippi (ten bills, mean number of descriptors 10.4), Missouri (2 bills, mean number of descriptors 7), New York (three bills, mean number of descriptors 8.33), North Carolina (three bills, mean number of descriptors 9.33), Ohio (nine bills, mean number of descriptors 10.33).

[12] Sixteen total bills, 14 full-text versions available.

in 1995, 6 had mildly detailed language, 3 had moderately detailed language, and 9 had highly detailed language. Of the 34 bills introduced in 1996, 6 had mild language, 13 had moderately detailed language, and 15 had highly detailed language. Of the 33 bills introduced in 1997, 12 had mild language, 8 had moderately detailed language, and 13 had highly detailed language. Figure 5 combines the categories of bills with moderately and highly detailed language and demonstrates how the number of bills with moderately highly or have overtaken bills with mildly detailed language.

Fig. 5 Language Detail in State Phonics Bills, 1990-1997



Note: Because the number of bills introduced each year from 1990 through 1994 was very small, these figures have been combined.

Enactment of Phonics Bills

Prior to 1990, phonics language appeared in the statutes of three states: Arizona, New Mexico, and Ohio. Of those bills introduced in 1992 and 1993, 1 bill in each state was enacted in Louisiana and Mississippi. No bills were enacted in 1994. Three bills introduced in 1995 were enacted (1 in Alabama and 2 in California) whereas 15 bills introduced in 1996 (5 in California, 1 in Delaware, 1 in Idaho, 1 in North Carolina, 5 in Ohio, 1 in Oklahoma, and 1 in Wisconsin), and eight introduced in 1997 (3 in California, 1 in Delaware, 1 in Idaho, 2 in Louisiana, and 1 in Ohio) were enacted.

Factors Affecting the Introduction of Phonics Bills

Several factors appear to influence the introduction of phonics bills into state legislatures. First, such bills are disproportionately introduced by Republican lawmakers. Second, they are more likely to be introduced in states where the Republican party has substantial or dominant influence in the state's Republican party.[13] Third, there is a relationship between states in which challenges to Harcourt's whole language reading series *Impressions* took place and the introduction of phonics bills.

Party Affiliation and Phonics Bill Sponsorship

An examination of the party affiliation of the sponsors of phonics legislation revealed that a disproportionate number of sponsors were Republicans. The party affiliation of the bill sponsors could not be based on the 101 bills introduced between 1990 and the end of 1997 because (1)

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[13] A state Republican party is considered to be "substantially dominated" by the Christian Right if the "Christian Right strength in the GOP [is] above 25 percent but less than a majority. The Christian Right is considered to be dominant in a state Republican party if it "constitutes a working majority on major issues" (John F. Persinos, "Has the Christian Right taken over the Republican Party?" *Campaigns and Elections* 15 (September 1994): 22).

some bills were introduced by committees, (2) the party affiliation of some sponsors could not be discovered (primarily those who were no longer members of the state legislature), and (3) some bills were omnibus bills which meant that it was not possible to affix with any degree of certainty a prophonics position to their sponsors. In addition, bills with more than three sponsors were excluded from consideration because of the difficulty of determining which of their multiple sponsors was responsible for the inclusion of the phonics related provisions. Of the 89 bills with sponsors of phonics legislation who could be identified and whose party affiliation could be determined, 44 (65.2 percent) were introduced by Republicans, 26 bills were introduced by Democrats, and 5 by Independents. According to the Conference of State Legislatures, as of July 12, 1996, 48 percent of all state legislators were Republicans (Erikson, B., personal communication, July 23, 1996).[14]

Of the 14 bills introduced between 1990 and 1994 whose sponsorship could be determined, 7 (50 percent) were introduced by Republicans. In 1995, 11 sponsors (64.7 percent) were Republicans. In 1996 and 1997, the Republican sponsorship was 69.2 (n=18) and 73.3 (n=22) percent respectively. Considering the two groups of bills, those from 1990 through 1994 and those from 1995 through 1997, Republican sponsorship was 50 percent for the earlier group, as previously stated, versus 69.9 percent for the more recent group. Thus, the sponsorship of phonics legislation appears to be becoming more Republican. The mean number of descriptors used in bills with Democratic sponsors of phonics legislation was 6.1 whereas bills with Republican sponsors had a mean of 8.6 descriptors.

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[14] Taking figures for the 1995-legislative sessions does not appreciably alter the disparity. In that year Republicans comprised 48 percent of all state legislators.

A second connection between the state Republicans and phonics legislation is the inclusion of a phonics plank in state party platforms. Thirty-six state Republican platforms or statements of resolutions were obtained.[15] Six platforms (California, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas) mention phonics. Platform statements range from Kansas' "schools should return to a curriculum that stresses basic skills, such as phonics . . ." to Oklahoma's "the primary goal of our public education system should be to teach the basic subjects of reading (emphasizing the intensive systematic phonics method)."[16] Of the six states with phonics included in the Republican party platform, 83 percent (n=5) have or have had multiple phonics bills and/or phonics bills which employed moderately or highly detailed language.

The Effect of the Christian Right on Phonics Legislation

The Christian Right is dominant in the Republican Party in 83 percent of the states with platform inclusion of phonics as opposed to 38 percent of all states.[17] States with substantial or dominant Christian Right influence are also more likely to have had phonics bills. Twenty-one (80.8 percent) of the 26 states with phonics bills have this degree of Christian Right influence in their Republican parties. In 13 (50 percent) of the 26 states with phonics bills, the Christian Right is dominant in the state Republican party, as opposed to its dominance in only 38 percent of all

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[15] Six states responded with the information that they did not have platforms or that they adopted the national Republican platform. Eight states did not respond to a request for a copy of their platforms.

[16] Kansas State Republican Party, "Kansas Republican Party 1996 Handbook." (Kansas Republican Party, Topeka, Kan., brochure, 1996), p. 62; Republican State Committee of Oklahoma. "Oklahoma Republican State Convention." (Republican State Committee of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City, Okla., brochure, 1996), p. 16.

[17] For this discussion all figures relating to the strength of the Christian Right in state Reublican parties generally is taken from Persinos, pp. 20-24.

state Republican parties. Eighteen states have had multiple phonics bills. Sixteen (88.9 percent) of these states have moderate or substantial Christian Right dominance of their state Republican parties. Fifty-seven percent (n=4) of seven states whose mean number of descriptors per bill was greater than seven had dominant influence of the Christian Right their state Republican parties. The Christian right is dominant in 9 (52.9 percent) of the 17 states where the language was moderately detailed or highly detailed (the mean number of descriptors was greater than 3). Table 1 shows the relationships between Christian Right dominance of state Republican Parties and proposed phonics legislation.

Table 1

Dominance of Christian Right in State Republican Parties with Phonics Bills, 1990-1997

States	Percentage of States in Which the Christian Right Is Dominant	Percentage of States in Which the Christian Right Has Substantial Influence or Is Dominant
All states	38	62
With phonics bills	50 (55)	69 (80)
With multiple bills	67 (64)	90 (79)
With bills containing moderately or highly detailed language	65 (53)	88 (73)
With multiple bills or bills containing moderately or highly detailed language	62 (55)	81 (78)

Note: Figures in parenthesis are from a previous study showing the percentages through the middle of 1996. No parenthetical information is given for the "all states" category since the source for this information was Persinos' study. Thus, these figures would not vary.

Challenges to *Impressions* and the Introduction of Phonics Legislation

From 1986 to 1994, the first commercially produced whole language materials, Harcourt's *Impressions* reading series, was challenged in 75 school districts in 16 states.[18] While relatively few of the *Impressions* protesters explicitly cited lack of phonics in their objections to the series, various Christian Right organizations were involved in or lent support to groups challenging the series. Overall, 75 percent (n=12) of the states with *Impressions* challenges also had phonics bills. Eleven of these states had either multiple bills and/or bills with moderately or highly detailed language. The Christian Right is a substantial or dominant influence in the state Republican party in eight of the eleven states with both *Impressions* challenges and multiple bills or detailed bill language. In fact, the state with the greatest number of bills, California with 20 bills, also had the largest number of *Impressions* challenges (36). It should be noted that the California Department of Education had adopted a whole language reading curriculum which may have resulted in more California districts adopting *Impressions* or increased opposition to nonphonics based methods of reading instruction or both. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to suppose that states which experienced *Impressions* challenges had, and continue to have, a constituency of concerned individuals or groups or both who actively oppose nonphonics based methods. In addition, just as not all *Impressions* protesters were members of or received support from Christian Right organizations not all prophonics activists are seeking faith-based curricular reform in public

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[18] Frances R. A. Paterson, "Legally Related Religious Challenges to Public School Materials, Curricula, and Instructional Activities: The *Impressions* Challenges, 1986-1994" (Ed.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1997), pp. 256, 367-75. In Paterson's study a challenge was defined as "an act intended to cause the removal or alteration of public school materials, curricula, or instructional activities." Thus, challenges do not include attempts to influence the selection of materials or curricula. *Id.*, pp. 38-39.

education. However, phonics is one issue in which secular educational conservatives can and do make common cause with Christian Right individuals and groups because their respective visions of the best methodology for public school instruction are highly consistent.[19] Both secular and religiously motivated individuals and groups who are actively critical of contemporary American public school education seek reforms that would emphasize teacher-centered learning and highly structured classroom instruction. The type of phonics instruction being mandated or encouraged by many phonics bills would insure that reading instruction was acceptable to both groups.

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[19] For a more detailed analysis of Christian Right prophonics activism and ties between Christian Right organizations and secular back-to-basics and prophonics groups, see Frances R. A. Paterson, "Mandating Methodology: Promoting the Use of Phonics through State Statute," In *In Defense of Good Teaching*, ed. Ken Goodman (New York: Stenhouse, in press)